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Bill West, the Scholarly Spy

Finding Clues In Soviet Literature

By David Remnick
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Bill West started out as an English scholar searching for the "Dark Lady" in Shakespeare's sonnets.

He ended up a spy.

As an expert in Soviet language, literature and politics, West worked for the Counter Intelligence Corps during World War II and the Korean War and then for the Central Intelligence Agency from 1955 until his retirement in 1977.

As it turned out, West's job with the CIA included a literary calling. He helped the agency obtain underground Soviet literature (*samizdat*) through journalists, students and tourists and then tried to rechannel the books back to intellectuals in the Soviet Union who had no access to the work. One of the ways the literature was "reinserted" into the Soviet Union was through Soviet sailors who would buy the works in western Europe and then resell them on the black market at home.

In one of his poems, West describes himself as a "scholarly ex-spy on modest pension" and his enormous library of Soviet literature as the "companions of an eccentric sexagenarian."

The living room and two of the three bedrooms of West's condominium in Reston are crammed with books. West just sold his collection of 10,000 volumes of Soviet literature to Emory University. Pick up any of these books and it is obvious that West has read all or part of it. The pages are marked by underlinings and annotations in Russian, English and German.

"The change in my life was an ideological seduction," West said the other day. "I'm essentially a liberal. That's why I don't like the Soviet Union. I thought to myself, 'The Soviets would take these books away from me.' "

The verities of floor space and a handsome fee from Emory, and not Soviet ideology, are the reasons the books will move south to Atlanta. "When these books get to Emory," said West's wife, Hildegard, "we'll have a little breathing space at last."

West is trim and has all the sartorial grace of a professor at ease: Pendleton shirt, pale green corduroys, desert boots, glasses and a small forest of cowlicks and flyaway hair. His hobbies these days are philosophy, poetry and classical music. His stereo speakers are the size of coffins.

"Dad," said Bill West Jr., "is pretty eccentric. I had to tell my friends in school that he worked for the Army." And Hildegard West said her husband is "a bit unusual, I must admit."

Bill West has spent most of his adult life obsessed with a country he has never seen. He has, he said, never visited the Soviet Union and his view of the Soviet Union is as ominous as his view of the CIA is rosy.

"It's impossible for anyone in the clandestine services to go to the Soviet Union," he said. "When I took employment with the CIA, I thought that was the absolute best way to get to Russia. Look how it turned out. I could probably go now and they wouldn't do anything, but I wouldn't take the chance. It's an unnecessary risk. They can use any premise to pick you up."

Though he has used dozens of pseudonyms while working in Berlin and at CIA headquarters in Langley, West's name and identity are well known in the Soviet Union. He has a copy of Literaturnaya Gazeta in which he is named as an "eminent figure in the American secret service."

"Yes, the man who said that is Yuri Marin," West said. "He was a Russian who was aboard a Soviet ship out in San Francisco Bay in the mid-'60s. He jumped ship and he lived in the West for a while. Then he redefected. I don't know why."

After gaining degrees at Denison and Northwestern and teaching in Chicago, West joined the Army Air Corps. Because he was fluent in French and German, he was assigned to the Counter Intelligence Corps school in Camp Ritchie, Md., where he first was exposed to Soviet politics.

"We had instructors there who were defectors," he said. "They were very negative about the Soviet system. They knew what had happened under Stalin. We were Russia's ally at the time, but we knew it was a temporary alliance."

While working for the CIC in Nuremberg, West stayed at the Grand Hotel and met Russians who were there to witness the Nazi war crimes trials. They fueled his interest and convinced him "that Soviet relations would be the dominant political issue of our lifetime." West learned Russian from an émigré teacher in the United States and then was assigned periodically to Berlin between 1952 and 1963, first by the CIC and then by the CIA.

"Berlin was an espionage utopia in those early days," West said. "There was free transit between east and west and we had the cooperation of many East Germans and, even, Russians."

The Soviet compound in East Berlin, the Karlshorst, housed the KGB and the Americans were housed several miles to the west in an area called the Dahlem. For a while, according to West, the Americans were able to monitor some Soviet communications by installing an underground listening post in a telephone tunnel in East Germany. But the day-to-day work of espionage, said West, was "not in the 007 mode at all."

"It's a patient exploitation that requires information, and information on how to get more information. It's a collection of small pieces that are fit together and eventually form a picture . . . There were never many mysteries about the Soviet Union's strategy and intentions. What you wanted were the names and numbers of the current players and a picture of what they were trying to do."

West is reluctant to discuss the Soviet émigrés whom he has "debriefed." He is cautious "for their security and mine."

"I knew [historian and dissident writer] Andrei Amalriek. He was killed in an automobile crash [in 1980]. Whether it was a real accident or engineered by the Soviets, I don't know. Another one of the defectors I talked to a number of times was Arkady Belinkov, a major writer who defected with his wife. He'd been put in a prison camp for 10 years by Stalin for his unorthodox views, as they called it. He'd been terribly beaten and he developed a heart condition. When he got here he was taken to the Mayo Clinic.

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"They both were involved in the internal dissident movement and helped us in describing the dimensions of the movement and its motives, who was doing what, who was in camps."

Simply by attending congressional hearings and reading newspapers and magazines, Soviet intelligence is able to form an accurate picture of all areas of American social, military and political life. The CIA's sources of information on Soviet life include interviews with Jewish emigres and dissidents and careful readings of *samizdat* literature.

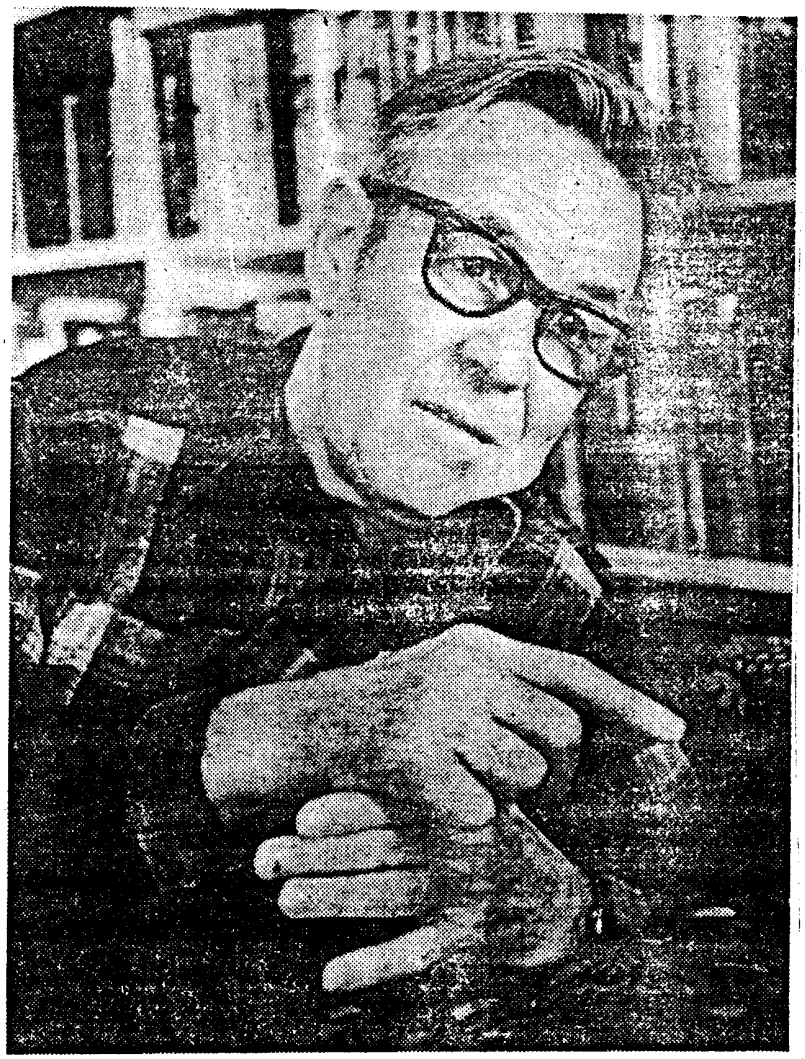
"Part of the agency's program was to get literature of the Stalin and post-Stalin eras back into the Soviet Union," West said. Boris Pasternak's novel "Doctor Zhivago" and the Chronicle of Current Events, a compilation of dissident activity, arrests and trials, were among the books "returned" to the Soviet Union, but West will not name other authors and titles for fear that the publishing houses that helped carry out the program would suffer.

West has also been a teacher. When Henry Kissinger was in the Army reserves in the CIC, his Russian language instructor was Bill West.

"Oh, Henry only has a smattering of Russian," West said. "I just taught him for a couple of summers . . . He's an old friend. When détente began—and I disapproved of détente—I sent him some *samizdat* I was working on."

The bulk of West's library of Sovietica is disappearing. In his absence, another, more conventionally academic spy may have solved West's first ambition.

"It turns out that a fellow thinks he's discovered who Shakespeare's 'Dark Lady' is," he said. "That's a good bit of detective work, isn't it?"



BY RAY LUSTIG—THE WASHINGTON POST

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